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Charities fear greater need, fewer donations

By Selicia Kennedy-Ross
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As the holiday season approaches, local charities are concerned they may have difficulty meeting demand for assistance, especially with an influx of needy families displaced by recent wildfires.

In the past few years, donations have been dropping for food banks and programs that provide the needy with holiday gift baskets.

Arrowhead United Way in San Bernardino has felt the decrease. The organization assists charities with donations of Thanksgiving food and vouchers.

Both food and monetary donations have gone down in the past couple of years, said Becky Martin, director of Community Impact, a group that determines how United Way spends funds.

"We didn't have many donations of turkeys at all last year," she said. "In the past, groups would give us 40 turkeys, and we would pass those on. We just haven't had the donations."

There is a greater need now, especially since the wildfires, Martin said.

"What I've heard from people is

that even if their home wasn't burnt, the expense of being out of a job or having to live outside of their home during the evacuation is weighing on them," she said. "There are circumstances like that where people are finding themselves in greater need, whereas they might not have been in need before."

Being able to meet those needs has concerned Martin.

"We can only do what we can do," she said.

Jo Anne Wilkes, senior case manager at Catholic Charities, which has been assisting evacuees with food and food vouchers, said, "Definitely there's a concern of meeting the demand to help those in need, even before the disaster."

She said she anticipates getting more wildfire-related cases. In 2003, her case load tripled following the Old Fire.

"We're worried, of course, about the holiday season with so many more people to serve," Wilkes said.

"In the last couple of years, we've had less to give in our Christmas and Thanksgiving baskets. Donations have slowed in the past couple years. Food donations have not improved either, and we pray there will be some donations."

Last year, Catholic Charities served between 300 to 500 people during its annual Thanksgiving dinner. This year, it plans to feed more.

Every year the need seems to be growing and donations seem to lessen, said Amparo Olguin, executive director of the Home of Neighborly Services in San Bernardino.

"Donations have been going down and there seems to be more people in need now — big families," she said. "It hasn't hit us yet but it will hit us, they are coming in now for food."

Olguin said she was also worried about how the organization was going to fill its holiday gift baskets this year.

"It's going to be hard on us," she said. "The churches are the ones that help us and they are stretched thin helping the fire victims."

Herman Pena, who oversees the food bank at the Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County, is also feeling the pinch. The food bank helps distribute about 22 pounds of food from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to roughly 11,000 households per month countywide.

"We've had requests for food from several agencies but we haven't been able to help them," Pena said. "I'm worried. Our allocation of commodities is down considerably and donations are down too, not just here in the county, but all over."

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